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SUBJECT: WEST BENGAL'S "LEFT" - OUT IN THE COLD

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¶1. (SBU) The Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPI-M) dominated Left Front in West Bengal is currently examining the reasons for the disastrous parliamentary election results, which saw its seat tally reduced from 35 to 15, the lowest since its came to power in 1977. Party members are divided, both according to personal allegiances and ideological differences as to where the party went wrong. State leaders tend to blame the party's national level "mistakes" such as the Left's withdrawal from the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government or the failed marketing of the faulty product that was the "Third Front". Others view state level "mistakes" such as forcible land acquisition for industry and departure from some of the party's pro-poor policies of the past as reasons for the electoral debacle. In West Bengal, as in the rest of eastern India, local, rather than national, politics played a decisive factor in the 2009 parliamentary elections (See Reftel).

¶2. (SBU) Trinamool supremo and new Railways Minister Mamata Banerjee has achieved what no other political leader in West Bengal has been able to do in 32 years - shatter the illusion of the CPI-M's invincibility - and is riding a increasing wave of momentum. She successfully ran an opposition campaign with a message of "change" and opposition to forcible land acquisition for industry. Her campaign was aided by a tactical pre-poll alliance with Congress. The CPI-M had alienated traditional supporters (farmers and Muslims) through aggressive industrialization policies, complemented by weak development initiatives, particularly in rural or socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. The 2009 parliamentary elections may have been the first tolling of the CPI-M's death bell, internally prompting considerable soul-searching and perhaps its transition into more of a social democratic party. Portions of the humbled and vulnerable Left, whose "anti-US imperialism" plank failed to pay electoral dividends, may also be more receptive of the US's "enhanced strategic partnership" with India.

¶3. (SBU) If the Left is to remain politically relevant, it will have to decide upon a way forward with an appropriate leader and a strategy to confront the upcoming political tests: municipal and state assembly by-elections in 2009, Kolkata city elections in 2010, and the real prize - the state assembly - in 2011. Regardless of the CPI-M's future course of action, what is clear is that Banerjee will utilize her position as a minister and UPA ally at the Center to govern, direct central funds to West Bengal, and seize any opportunity to make her case for change.

TAYLOR